

How to select your Christmas tree

DOVER — As America rediscovers her roots in tradition, more and more families each year are turning to a living symbol of the Christmas season — a fresh, natural evergreen tree.

Most folks still rely on "choose and cut" farms, where generally you cut the tree you select, or one of the many vendors who display their trees at garden centers or retail lots this time of year.

No matter what method you use, the Pennsylvania Christmas Tree Growers Association recommends these guidelines for selecting a tree and setting it up at home.

SHOPPING

Freshness is extremely important to tree buyers, and there are two tests for it. First, gently bend a needle between your fingers. A fresh tree's needles will easily bend. If the needle breaks, the tree is drying out. Second, hoist the tree a few inches above the ground and bounce it sharply on its butt to dislodge old brown

needles that shed naturally in the Fall. If an excessive number of green needles drops, look for another tree.

The fragrance of fresh trees is a common reason people buy them. Fraser and Balsam firs are noted for having the most distinct "evergreen" aroma, while the various pines rank somewhat lower. Spruces are among the least aromatic trees. But the most fragrant evergreen of all is the Concolor or "white" fir. A little more difficult to find, this tree smells like a fresh orange and makes a great conversation piece.

Size. Simply put, don't buy too much tree. That magnificent seven-footer might look terrific on the lot, but the added height given to it by a tree stand and the "topper" could be more than your eight-foot ceiling can accommodate. And don't forget to measure the thickness of the trunk. Make sure it will fit through your tree stand's collar.

AT HOME

Water is one thing your tree will need right away. Before putting it into the stand, make a fresh cut about one inch above the end. This will let the tree absorb water quickly, keeping it fresher longer. Once you've cut the trunk, get it in the water quickly. Otherwise, the cut will begin to seal itself and defeat the purpose.

Keep the water level well above the cut, and check it every day. There's no need to add sugar, corn syrup, aspirin or other chemicals; according to the Association, plain water is the best holiday beverage for your tree.

Check every strand of lights for frayed cords, burned-out bulbs, cracking insulation or other defects. When you spot one, repair or replace it. Apart from creating a potential fire hazard, using damaged electrical products can result in a nasty shock.

Fire resistant. A fresh Christmas tree is naturally fire resistant

because it has a high moisture content. If you keep the base of the trunk soaking continuously in water, the tree will remain both fresh and flame resistant. Both characteristics have been confirmed in a study by the Connecticut Agricultural Experimenting Station. For added insurance, be sure you:

- don't use candles as illumination
- don't smoke near the tree

• keep the tree away from drying sources of heat

• unplug all lights when you leave the home or go to bed

Selecting and caring for a fresh Christmas tree doesn't take any special skills or abundance of time, but it can brighten your home physically and emotionally. It can bring back childhood memories, or serve as the foundation for building new ones.

USDA payments down 9% in '84

WASHINGTON — Government payments to farmers in 1984 totaled \$8.4 billion, 9 percent less than the previous year, according to the U.S. Department of Agriculture's 1984 report of Economic Indicators of the Farm Sector.

Direct cash payments for deficiency, diversion, disaster, storage and conservation programs totaled \$4 billion, down slightly from \$4.1 billion in 1983.

Payment-in-kind disbursements totaled \$4.5 billion, following the \$5.2 billion in 1983, leaving total 1984 direct Government payments at \$8.4 billion.

According to the report, wheat deficiency, diversion and disaster payments accounted for the largest share of cash payments, totaling almost \$1.8 billion, including \$1.2 billion in deficiency payments. Feed grain program payments were down considerably, totaling \$367 million, with \$296 million in deficiency payments.

Pennsylvania farmers received close to \$6.5 million in deficiency payments for corn, barley, sorghum and wheat and 1984 Wheat Diversion Program payments amounting to \$238,263. Conservation program payments amounted to a little over \$3.5 million (\$3,568,292). Conservation programs include the regular Agricultural Conservation Program (ACP), the Long Term Agreement (ACP), Forestry Incentives Program, and the Rural Clean Water Program.

Under the various ASCS conservation programs, farmers pay a portion of the cost of putting conservation measures on their land. This means that the total amount of conservation work done on farms is almost double when the farmers' share is taken into account.

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